

Beyond 'voting with your chopsticks': Community organising for safe food in China

Theresa Schumilas* and Steffanie Scott†

*Geography and Environmental Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Ave W., Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, Canada.
Email: tschumilas@rogers.com

†Geography and Environmental Management, University of Waterloo, Canada.

This paper describes the recent emergence of alternative food networks in China in the context of widespread food quality concerns. Drawing on interviews and public blog posts, we illustrate how participants in these networks are moving beyond instrumental market relations and developing the collective agency necessary to participate in shaping China's food system. We argue that the initiators and participants in these alternative food networks are not only individual shoppers who 'vote with their chopsticks', but are also nascent activists deploying grassroots community organising strategies. We reveal how these networks are using inclusive and reflexive processes to build diverse networks, how they are using internet communications to extend their reach, voice dissent and engage in nascent 'bottom up' policy formation, and how they are building influential connections and actively, but unofficially, expanding linkages to broader emancipatory spaces of global and social justice movements.

Keywords: *alternative food networks, China, community organising, digital food activism, food safety crisis, reflexivity*

Our leader brilliantly displayed his sagely prowess. In place of oppression he ruled with gentleness and millions of people gave him their hearts. ... And then heaven sent no disaster. The spirits of the hills and rivers were tranquil and the birds and beasts, the fishes and tortoises, all enjoyed their lives according to their nature. But the descendants of these kings did not follow their example, and great heaven sent down disaster. ... When the hungry go without food the people become unruly (25 Mencius, Book I, Part II, ch. 4, verse 6).

People cannot earn a living farming anymore in China. There is no honour in growing food (CSA operator, 2012)

In China today we have enough food to eat, but what we have is not safe to eat. People are worried about feeding it to their children. It is a new kind of famine (Buying club volunteer, 2012)

The first quote above is an excerpt from the 'Mandate of Heaven', an ancient story from the Zhou dynasty (11th century BC), later elaborated by Mencius, and taught to every Chinese child in pre-Confucian times. It is a story about (what we in the global north might call)¹ food security, or perhaps even food justice, and the moral authority of leadership. As the story goes,

a leader's mandate to rule is given by Heaven (versus a blood line or by the voice of the people). The source of legitimacy to rule is vague (Heaven), but the story is clear about how to maintain the legitimacy of leadership. To maintain this mandate, the ruler needs to ensure the harvest is secure and the peasantry is satisfied. According to the story, food insecurity is a cause for rightful rebellion. Linking governance with people's right to subsistence and food security has remained the basis of Chinese political philosophy for over 2000 years.

Consider that, during our lifetimes, China has almost miraculously transitioned from experiencing the world's worst famines to becoming the world's largest food market² and, as the story goes, the rulers have maintained their mandate of Heaven. But now the situation is evolving, and many suggest that China is at a crossroads. A food safety crisis has gripped the country for two decades now and the state has been unable to address the people's concerns. There is a growing inequity between rural and urban people, and millions of rural peasants have abandoned all hope of earning livelihoods from agriculture and are turning to driving taxi cabs in the city or working in village factories. This has left old people to farm in the countryside on land which is both ecologically fragile after

decades of being pumped up by synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, and politically vulnerable under a state hungry for land to fuel its economic growth and meet its food security goals. The social and ecological costs associated with China's economic 'miracle' are turning out to be extensive.

The subsequent quotes above, from volunteers interviewed for this research, illustrate the frustrations with a state that seems to be neglecting its responsibility to subsistence ethics in the social contract described by the Mandate of Heaven story. While the meaning of subsistence may have changed to include food quality in addition to sufficiency, the symbolism of the Mandate of Heaven story remains present in examples of urban and rural resistance in present day China (Perry, 2008). Indeed, breaches in the 'social contract' suggested by the story underpin the emergence of new and diverse forms of food procurement relations that we call 'alternative food networks' (AFNs), which are rapidly expanding in China's peri-urban landscape.

On the surface this seems like a narrative we know very well. Throughout the global north, AFNs have evolved in response to an agro-industrial system that disconnects people from food and food producers, resulting in lost traditions, threats to smaller-scale producers, environmental degradation and consumer anxieties about food quality and safety. These alternative networks are assemblages of diverse initiatives employing grassroots democracy and community organising methods to reconnect producers and consumers with ecological forms of production and fair trade relations (DeLind and Bingen, 2008; Lyson, 2005; Goodman *et al.*, 2012).

Global north AFNs have emerged in liberal capitalist democracies with industrialised food systems characterised by private land ownership, a declining small-farm sector, consolidated farm-to-retail chains, a predominance of supermarket retail, standards and laws to safeguard food safety and an extensive civil society sector organising and advocating for changes. The Chinese context, however, sits in contrast with its unique version of a 'market economy with socialist characteristics', a commons approach to land ownership, predominance of smallholder agriculture (although this is being eroded), traditional marketing chains based on wholesale and wet markets, productivism to support an

obsession with national food security, nascent food safety legislation and a civil society with limited autonomy from a state that keeps shifting the terrain of what is permitted. We suggest that much could be gained from research that explores the emergence and trajectories of AFNs in this contradictory landscape.

In this paper, we focus on the ways in which AFNs emerging in China are moving beyond market-based activities as individuals in these networks begin to take on roles beyond passive consumers. We argue that the initiators and participants in these AFNs are not only individual shoppers who 'vote with their chopsticks', but are also nascent activists deploying grassroots community organising strategies. In this sense we focus on strategies being employed by a relatively privileged group of people pursuing an emerging food activism motivated by food quality concerns. We begin with a necessarily brief description of these networks and the motivations of their participants, highlighting their emergence in the context of China's 'food safety crisis'. We then review emerging scholarship originating in the global north that sees food system alternatives as complex market-civil society networks, reframing analyses towards collective and away from individualist responses to food system challenges. With this conceptual framing, we draw on interviews and on-line communications to detail three central community organising strategies taking shape in China's expanding AFNs. First we describe how, similar to their global north sisters, Chinese AFNs can be blind to privilege and perpetuate the very injustices they seek to transform. Yet, using inclusive and reflexive processes, participants are building diverse networks. Second we illustrate how these emerging activists are using internet communications to extend their reach, express dissent and engage in nascent 'bottom up' policy formation. Third, we describe how these AFNs are building influential connections and actively, but unofficially, expanding their connections to broader emancipatory spaces of global social justice movements. Finally we conclude that China's AFNs can be considered as a type of laboratory where new food citizens are being gradually imagined, and nascent civil society organising around food safety is evolving, leaving unsettled questions raised by the Mandate of Heaven narrative.

Methods

Our research is situated within a multi-layered, Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded exploration of China's ecological and organic food sectors. The particular findings presented here are based on interviews and site visits with 19 initiatives (15 Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)³ farms, 2 ecological farmers' markets and 2 buying clubs) conducted between April and November 2012. These different initiatives, dispersed across Beijing, Jiangsu, Anhui, Shaanxi, Henan, Fujian, Sichuan and Yunnan, work together in complex networks we refer to as AFNs. Our interviews and site visits were conducted in Chinese and translated simultaneously into English by a member of our research team. Following the field research, having observed the central role that on-line communications play in China's evolving AFNs, we monitored 'Weibo'⁴ posts of the central AFN 'activists' for four months. The 'bloggers' we 'followed' included a peasant farmer, CSA operators, buying club volunteers, farmers' market volunteers and consumers.

Emergence of AFNs in the context of China's 'food safety crisis'

China's food consumers are generally excited about food system changes resulting from greater globalisation. They celebrate diversifying food choices, greater food availability and moving from the season bounded choices formerly regulated by the state (Veck *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, there is little evidence of anti-globalisation food boycotts, with some scholars suggesting that the link between ethics and consumption has not yet made it to China (Gerth, 2003). Boycotts of global products or retailers that have occurred⁵ have typically had a nationalistic bent, linked to the ways in which the companies have portrayed Chinese traditions in their advertising, rather than the social, ethical and/or ecological concerns that characterise boycotts in the global north (Dong and Tian, 2009; Nyiri, 2009). However, in recent years, food safety has become a focal issue and consumers are pursuing better food quality. Chinese consumers generally, and the activists in AFNs specifically, understand food safety

broadly to include not only food produced under sanitary conditions and unadulterated by additives, but also food that is free from environmental pollutants and agricultural inputs such as antibiotics and pesticides (Holdaway and Husain, 2014; Yang, 2013).

China's food safety scandals started to receive exponential attention in 2008 when 40 000 infants had to be hospitalised because of deliberate contamination of milk powder with melamine (Yan, 2012). Since that time, scholars have begun to unpack the ways such incidents reveal deep social and political processes deserving of the term 'food safety crisis' (Cheng, 2012; Yan, 2012). Yan (2012) has proposed a typology that reflects a broad definition of 'food safety crisis' including the following: incidents that occur because of food hygiene problems, incidents linked to food system industrialisation, such as contamination because of extensive use of fertilisers and pesticides, and incidents associated with deliberate contamination driven by profit motives.

An emerging scholarship wonders if these widespread food safety problems could be motivating the formation of nascent civil society organising around food (Schumilas, 2014; Scott *et al.*, 2014; Si *et al.*, 2015). Klein's (2009, 2013) ethnographic work and Yang's (2013) analyses of on-line activism suggest that we could be seeing a growing dissent and contention about food quality and safety in the context of these crises. Klein (2009) describes how in private, people are highly critical of the ineffectiveness of China's food safety governance but notes the absence of collectivised or organised demands for change to date (Klein, 2013). Yang (2013) suggests that this could change, and that the resistance and challenges to the state's inability to ensure food safety are escalating in on-line communications and could become a 'sensitive' issue for the state. We seek to contribute to this evolving scholarship by exploring the grassroots community organising strategies used by alternative food provisioning networks (AFNs) that have arisen in response to these food quality concerns.

The initiators and organisers of these AFNs are primarily a group we might refer to as 'middle class'.⁶ They are typically young people, born after 1980, and therefore raised after the 'reform and opening' to the west. They are university

educated and connected to the world through the internet and often extensive personal networks. Their work to develop different kinds of food relations is driven by diverse motivations. Some are concerned about the marginalisation of peasants in rural China, and seek to re-ignite lost food and farming traditions, and reconnect urban consumers with peasant farmers. Primarily urban born, they have limited direct experience with China's traditional peasantry, yet they feel sympathetic to its problems, and understand food initiatives as a way to assist. In particular interviewees criticised policies that deny equal social benefits to rural migrants in the city. Other AFN initiators are concerned about environmental issues and work in collaborative relations with environmental NGOs. Interviewees spoke critically about the lack of funding for organic agriculture noting that the state was only interested in funding large 'dragon head' enterprises and not helping small peasant farmers. They voiced criticisms about the state's environmental policies such as subsidies for chemical pesticides and fertilisers, and the corrupt enforcement of organic regulations. However, the most significant dissent we heard was voiced in reference to the state's inability to ensure safe food, the uselessness of food safety regulations and corrupt food quality enforcement. What is striking is that frustration with the state's food safety governance was raised by every person we interviewed, even though none of our questions directly asked about this. The emerging food activists in these networks see food safety and quality as a growing 'crisis' in China and a primary way to engage with, and broaden the awareness of, others in order to challenge what they see as the state's inability to ensure a safe and healthy food supply.

Motivated by these concerns, China's AFNs originated with the evolution of a new type of ecological farmers' market. In contrast to traditional 'wet markets', where petty-traders bring products from large wholesale markets to smaller urban markets for re-sale, in the ecological markets studied here, farmers sell directly to urban consumers. Such markets were initiated in 2007 by NGOs as a way of helping people re-establish trust in farmers and in food. Today such markets exist around the country. They are consumer-led, volunteer-operated networks,

which offer a regular venue through which ecological, small-scale and artisanal producers sell their wares. For example, the Beijing Farmers Market, the largest of these markets in China, regularly attracts between 1000 and 2000 visitors and has weekly sales of US \$2400–\$4000.⁷ It works with a network of over 100 farms (including many of the CSA operators we interviewed), with an average of 40 vendors at each market.

Like the ecological markets, buying clubs have also emerged as central nodes in these AFNs. These offer a less formalised platform for reconnecting producers and consumers. Buying clubs began by small groups of women coming together to find and source food they can trust. The first such clubs quickly captured media attention and have expanded in size and diversified their activities. In Beijing, for example, we interviewed volunteers from a buying club that sources food for over 100 families from multiple CSA farms. Beyond sourcing food, these clubs offer self-help workshops, hold educational events, offer drop-in centres, coordinate cultural and recreational events and support charitable gleaning activities.

Both the ecological farmers' markets and the buying clubs have relations with multiple (we heard estimates ranging from 80 to 200) CSA farms. Even if these are over-estimates, the growth of CSAs has been fast, considering the first farm following this model emerged in 2007. CSAs in China take remarkably diverse organisational forms, operating as rural peasant-run farms, entrepreneur-led urban businesses and not-for-profit projects affiliated with universities or NGOs. Based on our site visits, a typical CSA farm works 6 acres and offers shares to 180 families, at a cost of \$US 32.50 per week.⁸ Moving beyond produce distribution, however, the CSAs we interviewed encourage members to visit the farm, offer educational opportunities, connect people through newsletters and on-line communications and draw the public to the farm for various social, recreational and personal fitness activities.

Moving beyond market-based initiative

As in the global north, China's AFNs can be considered market-based initiatives that

encourage people to seek out particular products and reconnect with producers. But the question of whether such market-based networks can organise opposition and resistance to dominant unsustainable food relations, resulting in changes to social, economic and/or environmental policies has been debated in AFN scholarship now for two decades. Indeed, scholars detail the ways in which AFNs can be places of exclusivity and privilege versus effectively transforming unjust social conditions. Without explicitly working to transform systemic inequities and power imbalances, AFNs can help to perpetuate some of the unjust relations they seek to alter (Allen, 2010; Allen and Sachs, 2007; Bedore, 2010; DuPuis *et al.*, 2011; Guthman, 2008), leaving scholars calling for alternatives to the alternatives (Guthman, 2008). Further, as market-based responses, AFNs can produce individualist subjectivities that are a product of dominant neoliberal perspectives and thus demonstrate another way that responsibility is devolved from the state to individual citizens (Goodman *et al.*, 2012; Guthman, 2008; Allen and Guthman, 2006). In AFNs, these subjectivities translate into individualist 'niche markets' comprised of producers and consumers, rather than collectivised, socially conscious citizens, and do little to change state policies and programmes that result in the unsustainable food relations the AFN participants seek to change (Allen and Guthman, 2006).

Recently, however, global north research has begun to contest the view that these are 'simply' market-based initiatives focused on individual consumer behaviour, arguing that AFNs are best understood as complex entanglements of market and non-market relations that are 'collectivising consumption' (Johnston, 2008:243) and establishing 'collective subjectivities' around food (Levkoe, 2011:691). This scholarship sees consumers not as individual shoppers who 'vote with their forks' (or in China's context, vote with their chopsticks), but instead as collectives of agents moving forward social change agendas. These hybrid 'market-civil society networks' identify and work towards common interests and reframe analysis towards collective and away from individualist responses to food system challenges (Levkoe, 2011).

In practice, building these collective subjectivities blends market-based activities with 'civic' relations, where food is used as the entry point. In this view AFNs are seen as experiments which go beyond the market to include evolving forms of collective agency and non-market institutions (Pratt, 2009; Renting *et al.*, 2012). This collectivist notion of citizenship posits AFNs to be places where consumers have shifted from passive receivers of goods in the marketplace to proactive agents who work alongside producers and others through networks and coalitions. Their role is extended beyond ethical consumption and sending 'signals' in the market about their values, to include collective efforts with others, such as policy advocacy, that shapes elements of the food system itself (Johnston, 2008; Koc *et al.*, 2008; Lamine *et al.*, 2012). As Johnston (2008:339) describes, 'possibilities for a more balanced citizenship-focused hybrid may be found in different modes of food provisioning, particularly when they are framed by non-profit organisations more able to de-centre the idea of consumer choice in the service of ideals like social justice, solidarity, and sustainability (e.g., community supported agriculture, slow-food movements, community food security projects)'. In these assemblages, producers also move beyond 'market' considerations to function as citizens who speak of their 'moral rights and responsibilities' (Lamine *et al.*, 2012:391).

However, this framing in the global north is based on a long history and culture of a civil society distinct from the state and the market that sees active political involvement in democratic decision-making process as a prelude to various kinds of overt political action and advocacy politics. The situation in China is remarkably different in that there is no historic separation between the individual and the state, and the degree to which a new independent civil society is emerging is contested. In this paper, we consider the ways in which, in addition to being experiments in alternative economics, AFNs in China are moving beyond instrumental market relations and developing the collective agency necessary to participate in shaping China's food system, rather than accepting the system as passive consumers. Drawing on interviews and public blog posts, we illustrate how this group of emerging food activists in China are using three core community organising strategies:

building reflexive practice, using the internet to expand their reach and developing influential alliances.

Building reflexive and inclusive practice

It would be simplistic to suggest that these nascent networks have managed to challenge deep historical problems in their brief history. Much of this global north social justice critique of AFNs is mirrored in our observations of Chinese AFNs. Our interviews reveal a deeply held historical distrust of peasants that works against reconnecting with the people who grow the food in these networks. China's AFNs privilege connecting to land and to the urban entrepreneurs who operate farms over the peasants who grow the food and labour on these farms. However, it is not only the consumers in these networks who display a distrust of peasant farmers. Indeed AFN organisers and CSA entrepreneurs at times also seem to contribute to the marginalisation of peasants. For some of the CSA operators in these networks, peasant farmers are simply labour, and there is no attempt to integrate them into the decision-making on the farms. When asked about the involvement of peasants in the farms, these organisers replied that the peasants had lost traditional farming skills and that they would have very little to share in planning the work on the farm. This is an interesting perspective considering peasants come from families with hundreds of years of experience with working on the land, while the urban people starting these CSAs are new to farming. Indeed those CSA operators urban backgrounds seemed blind to this othering and appeared more concerned about the availability of 'cheap labour' rather than celebrating or supporting recent state policies aimed at addressing rural marginalisation.

This blindness extends beyond CSA operators. At a national CSA conference in Beijing a young university student who spoke English well agreed to help us recruit peasant farmers as research participants. Despite not knowing anyone in the room, she proceeded to point out peasant farmers to us, explaining that she could identify them by their appearance and mannerisms (even though they appeared exactly like everyone else in the room to us). She

explained, 'They are of low quality in how they walk, dress and speak – I can tell by the way they are sitting that they are peasants from the countryside', thus reading the *suzhi*⁹ (Anagnost, 2004) of people from the bodily form, clothes and speech. This evaluation of peasants as being of low quality is widespread and extends beyond the AFNs. For example Schneider (Schneider and Schumilas, 2014) details the ways in which peasants and peasant production in China are cast as problems, in both political and public discourse which construct the term *nongmin* (peasant) as ignorant and backwards and as responsible for holding back progress. Indeed in our research, even the central protagonists in the AFNs we studied, who by all other accounts (as highlighted below) took strongly egalitarian and reflexive positions, at times seemed equally blind to peasant marginalisation and injustice. For example, one of the buying club organisers explained that she procures only from CSA farms operated by urban people and not peasant farmers because, 'they are hard to inspect and monitor because they do not have the environmental ideology'.

As in the global north, China's AFNs reveal social injustice based on entrenched inherited inequities. Certainly there are efforts to address injustices in these networks through charitable acts. For example, farmers' markets use money raised from food sales to purchase food for peasants living in poor regions, as well as to subsidise peasant farmers to attend training events and workshops. However, these localised approaches or 'band aids' do not fundamentally challenge structural conditions or cultural discourse (such as *suzhi*) that perpetuate marginalisation. In the global north, reflexivity, or a politics of respect, is seen as an important style of AFNs seeking to embrace and address blindness to privilege (Goodman *et al.*, 2012). By working with a strong awareness of injustices and inequalities, networks can create an open process that guards against the risk of the privileged taking hold of and co-opting the process. Reflexive processes emphasise 'becoming' versus assuming desired ends, and are conscious of deficiencies and pathology possible in our actions. Reflexivity involves facing and deliberating about underlying assumptions, practices, structures and the various possible ways of framing problems and actions. AFNs

demonstrating reflexivity build collaborations as 'open ended stories' (Goodman *et al.*, 2012:24) rather than beginning with 'like-minded' people who hold a shared view of world.

Our analysis of Chinese AFNs suggests reflexivity at work. AFNs are demonstrating a commitment to an inclusive and participatory process and are trying to broadly engage producers, consumers, peasants, entrepreneurs, officials, media and many other people into an assemblage that is non-hierarchical, open ended and networked. One of the ecological farmers' market organisers continued to refer to China's AFNs as offering a 'assemble through a platform' that allows people to assemble, discuss and develop initiatives, noting:

Production and sales connection is only a small part of our market. Every year thousands of consumers come. We know this is not enough to change the big environment. But we offer this platform to let people know more about organic and about peasant farming. Some of these people will invent new activities to put on this platform, so it will never be just a farmers' market.

AFNs in China demonstrate reflexive justice in the ways in which they focus on process over vision and reflect consciously about their deficiencies. For example, one of the farmers' market coordinators responded to our observation that there were few peasant farmers in the market by explaining:

You need to understand the situation in China about the peasant. No one trusts peasants. Most of the people who come to buy at the market would never buy their goods. We want to change this. But we have only been doing this for three years and peasants have been oppressed in China for much longer than that. We know we need to expand in numbers and build trust. After that, we don't know. We will have to talk and consider.

This openness to ideas and commitment to a participatory process is a struggle and not all the encounters and debates in these heterogeneous processes conclude positively. On one of our visits, there had just been a significant disagreement between a central CSA organiser and other operators at her CSA. She felt they were

moving more towards a business approach and focusing on production and member engagement and that they were losing sight of the underlying marginalisation of peasants that drew them to start the CSA in the first place. The struggle was not resolved amicably, and the tension was obvious. In the end, she moved on to remain involved in the network through a new CSA that experiments with new ways of empowering peasant farmers.

These and other examples depict the struggle in these AFNs to build politics and processes that expand opportunities for peasants and others through attention to reflexive practice. They demonstrate an inclusive dialogue that is attempting to bring together multiple perspectives and also the challenges in doing so.

Using the internet to voice dissent and extend reach

Beyond 'simply' a recruitment and information dissemination tool, we find that China's AFNs make extensive use of the internet, in particular the Weibo microblogs, as a key strategy for sharing information, organising activities and challenging state rhetoric, often by adopting state slogans and adapting their meaning. Following the work of Guobin Yang (2009) we concur that by operating close to the boundary of authorised channels in China, use of the internet combines the potential of mass communication with social change and resistance goals, making it a potentially powerful tool. He describes the ways in which on-line activism in China follows historically established practices and styles of contention with a focus on using rhetorical approaches such as issuing open letters and petitions and circulating slogans (Yang, 2009). He also details how the use of this media is rapidly escalating and diversifying, particularly among China's urban youth.

For example, extending Yang's observations to these AFNs, we noted the continual reference to and adoption of government slogans and rhetoric, seemingly at every available opportunity. Two slogans in particular were embraced and extensively shared within AFN communications. The phrase 'ecological civilisation' was announced in a speech of the sixteenth party congress in 2005 by former Premier Wen Jiabao,

and reconfirmed in 2007 at the seventeenth party congress by former President Hu Jintao, and the phrase, 'Beautiful China', was introduced as a central state slogan by President Xi Jinping in April 2013. We spent quite a lot of time trying to get people to talk about the meanings behind these often used phrases but this proved difficult. Interpreters simply used the phrase to explain the phrase and indicated that this was the state's direction. Finally one interpreter explained that these are slogans that really can mean whatever the state needs them to mean at any given time, noting that they 'mean everything and nothing'. These slogans are used by food activists to demonstrate support for, and alignment with, government food-related policy, and to criticise it at the same time. The tactic is similar to what Ho and Edmonds (2008) refer to as 'embedded activism', where alignment with political rhetoric is key to maintaining productive relationships with the state. This strategy reflects the blurred boundaries between the civil society and the state in China, and the cautious approach of activists to maintain a non-challenging profile and depoliticise their activism. Some AFN organisers reflected quite openly on the strategy. One farmers' market coordinator noted:

The reform policy of the country leads to the detachment of peasants from villages and we are trying to help them solve this, but some might worry about gathering of people together at the farmers' market because it could lead to unrest. It can't get too big. On the other hand, we think the government could be brought to support this. So to fit in we stay with the government and use their words so they will see us as allies. It is easiest for us to do this using Weibo.

Through internet communications, AFN activists also post their grievances quite openly in public space. Concurring with Yang's (2013) recent analysis of internet contention, we found that bloggers engaged with food safety issues in particular in openly critical ways. The following are a few examples of posts from January 2013:

We are tired of all the talk of food safety – it's ridiculous – every day there is a new problem and the government is doing nothing. They are irresponsible. But they have their own special food supply so they don't care about us. I don't understand how Chinese people can do

this to other Chinese people – deliberate adulteration of food – but worse than that, I cannot understand why the government does nothing. Someone should resign.

Yang (2013) cites remarkably similar postings and underscores the significance of these food safety-related responses. In China's political context, such seemingly benign posts may trigger large-scale social disturbances that indeed threaten regime security; as one blogger we followed said, 'If they can't fix this crisis, it will become a threat to harmony and stability.'

In addition to the internet being a comparatively safe vehicle for expressing dissent, we also found that AFN activists use it for nascent community consultation processes. In the global north, policy advocacy as undertaken by AFNs frequently involves community-based processes that 'give voice', through the democratic process, to diverse community members, often via grassroots research and consultation projects which organisations then use as a basis for advocacy (Koc *et al.*, 2008). In China such consultation has not been part of the ethic of developing policy. In this context, AFN activists are turning to the internet as a platform to engage diverse perspectives and shape documents describing their issues and goals. For example, one of the farmers' market organisers used the coincidence of our presence in China to organise a community meeting in which we could help to encourage AFN participants with examples of AFNs and organising activities from Canada. Far from being simply a venue for us to present information, however, the meeting evolved into a forum where different perspectives were collated and the farmers' market volunteer prepared a document summarising issues and themes important to China's emerging AFNs. On a subsequent visit, she showed us the document and explained that it is their 'version of your people's policy process'¹⁰ that 'starts to organise our views of what is needed in China and the work that AFNs can do.' This document was then posted and comments invited, with the goal of developing a type of foundational document to guide their next steps towards safe and healthy food.

In a second example, one of the CSAs conducted a fledgling study of CSAs in China, documenting how many there are, and their

types, and also exploring people's motivations for joining and their concerns with the dominant food system. They shared their findings on line, through their CSA newsletter, and at a CSA conference in Beijing. Subsequently this fledgling work was taken up and enhanced by academics and has become the early stages of Chinese scholarship on alternative food (see Chen, 2013a; Chen, 2013b).

Building influential and global alliances

AFN volunteers invest significant time enlarging their networks by forging ties with members of other nascent civil society groups, environmental NGOs and the media. In addition, their relationships with academic allies and representatives of the state seem particularly well developed. Several CSAs are connected to local government. For example, one operator described how a local government representative seemed quite interested in the CSA model noting:

Right now he can offer us nothing we need. He can only offer us a reduced price on fertilizer, but we don't need that ... He will still be useful to us one day, so we keep inviting him to events and we bring him food because we are cultivating *guanxi* with him.

Cultivating relationships with academics seems to be a particular strategy with student projects and jointly organised conferences being common to several of the CSAs. One quite influential academic for example is a strong supporter of the CSA approach and of AFNs. Dr Wen Tiejun is a previous Dean of the Institute of Advanced Studies for Sustainability and the School of Agronomy and Rural Development at Renmin University of China and former advisor to the state council on rural development issues. He is credited with the formulation of the foundational 'three rurals' policy mentioned above and has continued as a strong advocate, positioning rural wellbeing in China beyond the question of agricultural production (Wen, 2007; Wen *et al.*, 2012). An alliance with Dr Wen offers legitimacy to the alternative food movement in China.

The linkages being built by AFN participants extend beyond China and include a widening

range of connections with like-minded organisations and networks around the world. This heterogeneous development of alliances is precisely the kind of process that scholars argue is most provocative to the Chinese state (Heilmann and Perry, 2011; Yang, 2009). While the state has been tolerant towards resistance that is limited to particular locations, isolated incidents or groups with small participation, large heterogeneous linked processes are seen as a threat to hegemony. These global connections build ideologically congruent discourse and practices that join up otherwise unconnected actors. Building on the work of others (see Yang, 2005; O'Brien and Li, 2006) we also found that such linkages to be through *personal* more than organisational connections (to global food and environmental justice movements for example) in order to avoid the risk inherent in forming official and overt multi-network movements. In this way China's AFNs, while not engaged in transnational movements officially, are positioned as portals to a wide diversity of global movements for *individuals* interested in pursuing connections. Perhaps the strongest example of this is the connection between the New Rural Reconstruction (NRR) movement, global food justice movements and the AFNs.

NRR is a decade old re-articulation of a populist movement that existed prior to the Mao era and focuses on developing new directions for Chinese rural society. NRR is neither intellectual nor overt rural dissidence against the state. Most of the movement's organisers avoid contentious politics and emphasise harmonious relations (Day, 2008; Hale, 2013). NRR is both an academic critique of capitalist economics and a set of practical experiments and projects that are focused on rebuilding rural-urban relations around agro-ecological production and reviving rural culture. Academics associated with NRR argue that the problems of rural China cannot be understood simply through an economic lens. Rather rural social life needs to be 're-constructed'. The movement's projects are diverse and include establishing rural credit unions, farm supply cooperatives, a distillery, a performing arts troupe, children's centres, thrift stores, pro bono legal services and a wide diversity of farm cooperatives (many of whose products are found at the farmers' markets and CSAs we visited). In many ways, NRR is what

we might call a community economic development movement that links together social, economic and environmental goals through grassroots experiments and initiatives.

NRR intersects with China's AFNs in complex ways. First, several of the CSAs that were instrumental in forming these AFNs are operated by individuals who are also playing key roles in the broader NRR movement. Thus, these CSAs, and by extension the broader AFNs, are part of the experimental work of the NRR movement. Second, at several CSAs, young people who have grown up in urban areas but have rural ties have been developing farming skills with the intention of 'returning to the countryside' to start ecological farms and bridge urban-rural differences. These 'young people return to the countryside' projects are developing as central experiments of the NRR movement. The project surprises and interests Chinese NGOs and academics because it contrasts with the prevailing urban perspectives that see the rural as backward, fuelled by the memory of harsh times in the countryside in the Mao era.

Through this close association with NRR, AFNs become a portal, or a path to linkages with global food justice movements, that otherwise have no official presence in China. In research on NRR in China, Alexander Day (2008) and Matthew Hale (2013) describe these connections and illustrate the ways in which the NRR movement resonates strongly with non-Chinese movements such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, and La Via Campesina, highlighting attendance at conferences, meetings and anti-WTO protests outside of China. Representatives from these global justice movements were present at national CSA conferences we attended and it was clear that several AFN organisers have established personal relationships with members of these groups. In this way China's AFNs open the door to participation in global justice movements while remaining under the state's radar.

Conclusion – the Mandate of heaven revisited

This analysis suggests that China's AFNs are not simply sites of material transactions. They are also places where community is being built

and organised. Our findings illustrate the ways in which these networks are learning and using nascent community organising strategies in a context where there is no public involvement in policy development. Some of these strategies parallel those being used extensively in global north AFNs, so they have familiarity. Yet, we need to remind ourselves of the context of pervasive uncertainty in which these actions are situated. For example, operations at one of the farmers' markets in this research were shut down by the state a few months prior to our interviews because too many people would be gathering in a location close to where a state assembly was being held, and there was concern about large gatherings of people that could turn into a protest.

In China, the growth of the urbanised middle class, and their desire for higher quality food, makes these alternative networks possible and shapes them. We see AFNs to be remarkably reflexive networks characterised by struggle towards inclusiveness. Our interviews reveal that, while on one hand activists in these networks can be blind to their privilege, they are also trying to address a deep historical distrust of peasants that works against re-connecting with people who grow food. Further, given its diffuse nature, the internet provides a platform for activists to extend their reach, offering new possibilities for community organising as well as voicing dissent. Finally we detailed how these AFNs draw support at diverse scales including both indigenous rural development movements and international NGOs, and how they are building personal connections to global food justice movements that have no official presence in China. Hence, while these are on one hand 'market-based' networks, we suggest that the individual act of 'voting with your chopsticks' and sending market messages through food choices, does not fully capture the identity and relations of China's AFNs. Rather these are laboratories where food consumers are becoming 'food citizens' and are centring actions for the public good and decentering their private needs.

The symbolism of the Mandate of Heaven story presented at the beginning of this article has relevance for China's AFNs. For these activists, the meaning of subsistence has changed, and now includes food safety and food quality

in addition to sufficiency. They see the state as unable to secure safe food, prompting the emergence of the new forms of food relations we have described and motivating nascent civil society organising around food. Do AFN activists see the food quality crisis in China as reducing the Communist Party's authority to govern, as suggested by the Mandate of Heaven story? Certainly, the people we interviewed, and the posts we monitored suggest that people understand poor food quality to be an issue that the state is responsible for fixing. Further, some think that the continuation of poor food quality and food safety problems in China could trigger large-scale social disturbances and threaten regime stability. So, whether or not the 'food is in the pressure cooker' remains an open question.

Notes

- 1 We use the term 'global north' to refer to North America, Europe, Japan and Australasia.
- 2 China continues to be the world's largest consumer market for food and beverage products, with EUR 440 billion turnover in 2014 (see EU SME Centre, 2015; Garnett and Wilkes, 2014).
- 3 In Chinese, these initiatives are referred to as *shequ huzhu nongye*, which literally translated means 'peasant in mutual relations with urban residents'. However, the global north acronym 'CSA' is also widely used.
- 4 Weibo is an acronym for a networking service in existence since 2009. It is best described as a cross between blogging and Twitter. The use of Weibo has exploded in China, and as of early 2011 there were an estimated 100 million users (Yang, 2013). The state censors Weibo for subversive content.
- 5 Recent nationalistic boycotts have been levelled against Carrefour, Coca-Cola, McDonalds and Starbucks for example. See Nyiri (2009) for a full discussion.
- 6 Although, in doing so, we acknowledge that this is a highly debated and contested status in China, with contrasting views on its composition, characteristics, identities and political views (see Li, 2010).
- 7 Interview with Beijing Farmers' Market manager, 2012.
- 8 Based on our observations and conversations the price premium for organic food in China is generally several times higher than it is in North America or Europe.
- 9 *Suzhi* is a complex concept to translate into English. It refers to someone's moral quality. Dating to ancient China, *suzhi* is a powerful discourse linked to socially unacceptable patterns and identities that are responsible for holding back Chinese civilization. It goes beyond describing the quality of a person to describe a system of thinking and being.

- 10 One of the examples we shared in our presentation to the group was of Food Secure Canada's process of grassroots organising through its Peoples Food Policy project.

References

- Allen, P. and J. Guthman (2006) From "old school" to "farm-to-school": Neoliberalization from the ground up, *Agriculture and Human Values* 23: 401–415.
- Allen, P. and C. Sachs (2007) Women and food chains: The gendered politics of food, *International Journal of Sociology of Food and Agriculture* 15(1): 1–23.
- Allen, P. (2010) Realizing justice in local food systems, *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 3: 295–308.
- Anagnost, A. (2004) The corporeal politics of quality (*suzhi*), *Public Culture* 16(2): 189–208.
- Bedore, M. (2010) Just urban food systems: A new direction for food access and urban social justice, *Geography Compass* 4(9): 1418–1432.
- Chen, W. (2013a) Perceived value in community supported agriculture (CSA): A preliminary conceptualization, measurement, and nomological validity, *British Food Journal* 115(10): 1428–1453.
- Chen, W. (2013b) Perceived value of a community supported agriculture (CSA) working share: The construct and its dimensions, *Appetite* 62: 37–49.
- Cheng, H. (2012) Cheap capitalism: A sociological study of food crime in China, *British Journal of Criminology* 52: 254–273.
- Day, A. (2008) The end of the peasant? *New rural reconstruction in China*, *Boundary 2* 35(2):49–73.
- DeLind, L. and J. Bingen (2008) Place and civic culture: Re-thinking the context for local agriculture, *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 21: 127–150.
- Dong, L. and K. Tian (2009) The use of western brands in asserting Chinese national identity, *Journal of Consumer Research* 36(3): 504–523.
- DuPuis, E., J. Harrison and D. Goodman (2011) Just food? in A. Alkon and J. Agyeman (eds.), *Cultivating food justice: Race, class, and sustainability*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- EU SME Centre (2015) *Sector report: The food and beverage market in China*. Beijing: EUSME Centre.
- Garnett, T. and A. Wilkes (2014) *Appetite for change: Social, economic and environmental transformations in China's food system*. Food Climate Research Network.
- Gerth, K. (2003) *China made: Consumer culture and the creation of the nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goodman, D., E. DuPuis and M. Goodman (2012) *Alternative food networks: Knowledge, practice and politics*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Guthman, J. (2008) Neoliberalism and the making of food politics in California, *Geoforum* 39: 1171–1183.
- Hale, M. (2013) Tilling sand: Contradictions of the 'social economy' in a Chinese movement for alternative rural development, *Dialect Anthropology* 37: 51–82.
- Heilmann, S. and E.J. Perry (2011) Embracing uncertainty: Guerrilla policy style and adaptive governance in China, in S. Heilmann and E. Perry (eds.), *Mao's*

- invisible hand: The political foundations of adaptive governance in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ho, P. and R. Edmonds (2008) *China's embedded activism: Opportunities and constraints of a social movement*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Holdaway, J. and L. Husain (2014) *Food safety in China: A mapping of problems, governance and research*. Environment and Development (FORHEAD): Forum on Health.
- Johnston, J. (2008) The citizen-consumer hybrid: Ideological tensions and the case of whole foods market, *Theory and society* 37(3):229–270.
- Klein, J. (2009) Creating ethical food consumers? Promoting organic foods in urban Southwest China, *Social Anthropology* 17(1): 74–89.
- Klein, J. (2013) Everyday approaches to food safety in Kunming, *The China Quarterly* 214: 376–393.
- Koc, M., R. MacRae, E. Desjardins and W. Roberts (2008) Getting civil about food: The interactions between civil society and the state to advance sustainable food systems in Canada, *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* 3(2–3): 122–144.
- Lamine, C., M. Darolt and A. Brandenburg (2012) The civic and social dimensions of food production and distribution in alternative food networks in France and Southern Brazil, *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 19(3): 383–401.
- Levkoe, C. (2011) Towards a transformative food politics, *Local Environment* 16(7): 687–705.
- Li, C. (2010) Characterizing China's middle class: Heterogeneous composition and multiple identities, in C. Li (ed.), *China's emerging middle class*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Lyson, T. (2005) Civic agriculture and community problem solving, *Culture and Agriculture* 27(2): 92–98.
- Nyiri, P. (2009) From Starbucks to Carrefour: Consumer boycotts, nationalism and taste in contemporary China, *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 6(2): 1–25.
- O'Brien, K. and L. Li (2006) *Rightful resistance in rural China*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Perry, E. (2008) Chinese conceptions of "rights": From Mencius to Mao—and now, *Perspectives on Politics* 6: 37–50.
- Pratt, J. (2009) Incorporation and resistance: Analytical issues in the conventionalization debate and alternative food chains, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 9(2): 155–174.
- Renting, H., M. Schermer and A. Rossi (2012) Building food democracy: Exploring civic food networks and newly emerging forms of food citizenship, *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 19(3): 289–307.
- Schneider, M. and T. Schumilas (2014) What, then, is a Chinese peasant? Nongmin discourses and agroindustrialization in contemporary China, *Agriculture and Human Values* 32(2): 331–346.
- Schumilas, T. (2014) Alternative food networks with Chinese characteristics. Diss. University of Waterloo, 2014.
- Scott, S., Z. Si, T. Schumilas and A. Chen (2014) Contradictions in state- and civil society-driven developments in China's ecological agriculture sector, *Food Policy* 45(2): 158–166.
- Si, Z., T. Schumilas and S. Scott (2015) Characterizing alternative food networks in China, *Agriculture and Human Values* 32(2): 299–313.
- Veeck, A., H. Yu and A. Burns (2010) Consumer risk and new food systems in urban China, *Journal of Macromarketing* 30(3): 222–237.
- Wen, T. (2007) Deconstructing modernization, *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 39(4): 10–25.
- Wen, T., K. Lau, C. Cheng, H. He and J. Qiu (2012) Ecological civilization, indigenous culture and rural reconstruction in China, *Monthly Review* 63(9): 29–44.
- Yan, Y. (2012) Food safety and social risk in contemporary China, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71(3): 705–729.
- Yang, G. (2013) Contesting food safety in the Chinese media: Between hegemony and counter-hegemony, in *The China quarterly*, Vol. 214, pp. 335–355.
- Yang, G. (2009) *The power of the internet in China: Citizen activism online*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yang, G. (2005) Environmental NGOs and institutional dynamics in China, in *The China quarterly*, Vol. 181, pp. 46–66.